
IS THE WESTERN BALKANS A FAVORABLE REGION FOR RECRUITMENT OF JIHADISTS?

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Abstract: There are over 5 million Muslims representing 25 % of the region's population living on the territory of former Yugoslavia which had roughly 20 million citizens. By comparison, there are also around 5 million Muslims living in France, a country that had several colonies in the Muslim world, but the population ratio is different compared to the 60 million of the French population. Unlike the developed countries of Europe, the economies of the Balkan countries were destroyed by numerous interethnic conflicts. After the war of the '90s, the Balkans were living in a longtime economic and social crisis and a state of organized crime. With the beginnings of party pluralism, the different religions gained their former religious identity back.

In Croatia and Slovenia, the Catholicism experienced a renaissance, same as the orthodoxy did in Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro and the Islam did in Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Western Macedonia and Sandzak. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the fall of communism in the Balkans, the opportunity for increased foreign religious influence became a reality.

Today, the image of a tolerant, open Islam from the communist era is still present, although it too is affected. During the several decades of communist rule, the traditional religious networks that affirmed an Islam shielded from Wahhabist and Salafist influences were disintegrated.¹⁰⁸

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina intensified the implantation of the mujahidin in Bosnia in 1995. The traditional Muslim imams gradually lost their authority to the newcomers in a large number of mosques. At the same time, in light of its powerlessness, the state began to lose control in the field. It is estimated that some 67 mosques are controlled by radical Islam today, especially in rural and mountainous regions.¹⁰⁹

Under the pressure of great financial resourced which flowed in from Gulf countries, the education of Bosnian imams in Egypt and Saudi Arabia began. Step by step, Salafist imams were installed in the region preaching a more radical Islam. In such a situation, it was easier to recruit future Jihadists, especially among the socially vulnerable population.¹¹⁰ For example, one graffiti in Pristina (Republic of Kosovo) states: "Every woman will receive 200 euro a month if she wears a niqab".¹¹¹ The radicalization spread in Bosnia and Kosovo with the greatest intensity. "Bosnia and Kosovo remain the most dangerous countries in Europe due to their political weakness and the high corruption rate. More than 75.000 weapons circulate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one Kalashnikov can be bought for the price of 200 euro and easily brought into the Schengen region", a former police officer of the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina points out.¹¹²

Keywords: Western Balkan, jihadism, tolerance, moderate Islam

THE PHENOMENON OF RADICALIZATION

Experts feel that the process of radicalization was accelerated with the intensification of the societal and social evolutions over the last two decades. In this respect, there are at least six factors that come into play: a) the disintegration of the family structure and the weakening of the pater familias; b) devaluation of institutions such as the army, the schools and the church as society integration factors; c) cancelation of the obligatory army service; d) increase of the unemployment rate; e) failure of the welfare state and the increase in poverty; f) the ghettoization of certain Salafist rural local communities.¹¹³ We add to this g) the phenomenon of hybridization, or the connection of organized crime and Jihadism strategically elaborated by Jean-Francois Gayraud-“Theorie des hybrides. Terorisme et crime organise”, La revue Geopolitique Diploweb.com Pierre Verluise, 09.02.2018, as well as the phenomenon of increased migration.¹¹⁴

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA-FROM PAN-ISLAMISM TO NEO-SALAFISM

In the period before the foundation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and later the socialist federation, Bosnia and Herzegovina were countries with the longest running historic tradition of the Balkan Islam along with Albania. During the Ottoman revolution, the Bosnian Muslims first opposed the Ottomanism in 1831, and later promoted the pan-Islamism.¹¹⁵ After the painful falling apart of the Yugoslav federation which resulted in mass crimes and migration of Bosniaks, the process of radicalization of Bosnian Muslims began.

It is thought that there are two historic waves of radicalization in independent Bosnia. The first occurred during the war, when the Wahhabist unit "El Moudjahid" was established as part of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This military unit of roughly 2.000 people consisted of foreign and domestic members of the Wahhabist or Salafist movement. They were fanatical militants, but also notorious criminals perpetrating crimes against the Serbian and Croatian population. Alongside them fought the members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard working as military instructors in the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹¹⁶

This wave continued after the war ended and the Dayton treaty was signed in 1995. In 1996, with the assistance of Saudi prince Salman Bin Abdulaziz and his humanitarian organization, Al-Qaeda firmly implanted itself in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹¹⁷ These doubts were also confirmed by the American National Security Agency-NSA. According to some authors, "The war in Bosnia marked the import of the Jihad into Europe via the newly arrived fighters from Afghanistan, the Maghreb and the Gulf, as well as from Europe".¹¹⁸ Some of them remained there and began preaching and practicing an Islam different from that of the Balkans.

The second wave of Islamization came to be after the year 2000. It is estimated that at that time more than 10 % of Bosniaks accepted Wahhabism under the influence of Saudi Arabian and Iraq financial presence and their Sunnis and Shia. The experts believe that, due to the specifics of the "Balkan Islam" or the "European Islam" which is different from the indigenous radical Islam, it would be more suiting to refer to it as neo-Salafism instead of Wahhabism.¹¹⁹

THE ORIGIN OF THE JIHADISTS

The 9/11 attacks resulted in the USA and their western allies "suddenly" discovering the international Jihadists networks implants in Bosnia and Herzegovina which were affiliated with Al-Qaeda.¹²⁰

In the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency-USA) 2013 report which refers to the origin of the militants-Jihadists in ISIS and according to the number of citizens in Bosnia and its 350 fighters, or 92 per million citizens, the country ranked fourth after Jordan (315), Tunisia (280) and Saudi Arabia (107). Incidentally, the precise numbers for Saudi Arabia and Tunisia equal 3.000 volunteers each, followed by Morocco with 1.500 and 900 from Jordan. As for the European countries, 930 left from France, between 600 and 2.000 from Great Britain and some 400 departed from Germany.¹²¹

The registered numbers concerning the participation of 320 fighters in Bosnia were also confirmed in the book "Islamization of terrorism" by EUFOR counselor in Bosnia and Herzegovina Leslie Lee Lable and the Crisis Group report. However, in an 2017 interview, the Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina Dragan Mektic mentions a number of 226 fighters.¹²² The towns of Serici, Zeljezno, Polje Pojska, Mehurici, Bocinja, Travnik, Gornja Maoca, Grmusa, Velika Kladusa and Debeljak were listed as Wahhabist centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The campaign ran by neo-Salafists dubbed "Invitation to heaven" initiated in 2010 in Bosnia met a favorable response. The Jihadists participated in organizing training camps in Bocinja, Mehurici, Travnik, Gluha Bukovica, Pogo Relica and Osve.¹²³ One of the settlements most affected by the radicalization was Gornja Maoca, a small town where several Wahhabist families live isolated from the rest of the world. In spite of interventions by Bosnian police, they continue to wave the black flags of the Islamist state.

What contributes to the Salafist campaign is the high poverty and unemployment rate. Officially, the unemployment rate in Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2014 reached 44 % according to data published by the State Statistics Agency (which is the optimistic interpretation). As opposed to this, according to the Central Bank data, the realistic rate of

unemployment equals 27,5%, and this disparity is contributed to the high rate of illegal work. The pessimistic evaluation of the unemployment rate reaches 62,7%, according to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.¹²⁴ Regardless of the exactness of these numbers, the high rate of unemployment continues to pose a threat to the prosperous future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but is also a challenge for the young, poor Bosniaks who are attracted to financial offers for recruitment into Jihadist troops. It is no secret that "poverty is the main ally of terrorism".¹²⁵ The Dayton state remains fragmented between various cantons, with great shortcomings in the harmonization of the security and economic policies and unable to be run by the central authorities. It is powerless when faced with the challenges of the Jihadists as well.

KOSOVO: AMERICANOPHILES AND SALAFISTS

The Wahhabist infiltration into Kosovo has manifested following the war conflicts of 1998 and 1999. There had been some isolated cases of converting, but the Milosevic regime did not allow them to demonstrate any social visibility whatsoever. After the war, Kosovo opened up to various NGOs that tried to mask their true Salafist activities with humanitarian actions. Among these "charity" associations, the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, connected to Usama Bin Laden and ran by Kuwaiti Otham A.O.Alihadidar stood out. This NGO operated in Kosovo between 2000 and 2004, when it was forced to leave the country due to a revoked operation permit.¹²⁶

Three more NGOs-Al-Haramain Humanitarian Foundation, Sheikh Euid Bin Mohd and Al-Thami Charity Association Qatar Charitable Society had their operation permits revoked in the course of 2007.¹²⁷ Owing to enormous financial resources, these institutions assisted in the development of a major neo-Salafist network all across Kosovo.

The absurdity of the expansion of neo-Salafism in Kosovo lies in the fact that the former Serbian province proclaimed its independence in 2008 largely with the help of the USA. This act significantly reinforced the pro-American mood that had been nurtured ever since the 1998-1999 conflict. Moreover, the Albanian nationalism in Kosovo was constituted around the layman references to the Marxist and Leninist principals of the then UCK leaders who did not follow the Wahhabism. Thus, the Jihadists philosophy which is mostly anti-American and anti-western put the Kosovo politicians in an uncomfortable position. The same people who helped Kosovo gain its independence became targets of the Kosovo Jihadists. Gradually, little "foyers" of neo-Salafists started appearing in many towns, especially in Mitrovica, around the Great Mosque in Pristina, in Gnjilane, Prizren and Drenica.

On the political front however, the Islam in Kosovo did not obtain a lot of support due to interior disagreements, a lack of great intellectual figures and the Muslim heritage of the Ottoman empire which the Albanian nationalists had a hard time accepting.¹²⁸ On the other hand, the official structures of Islam in Kosovo did not receive widespread support by Muslim countries because the majority of member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have yet to recognize the independence of the youngest of the Balkan countries.

The common characteristic shared by Bosnia and Kosovo is the fact that these are countries that went through war and Muslims from the region and beyond demonstrate their solidarity with them. The general impression of the Muslims in relation to the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo was one perceived in a very Huntingtonian manner, as a war between Muslims and Christians. These two countries remain unstable and with inherited religious institutions that were unable to control the infiltrations of the neo-Salafists.

According to international experts, corruption and crime leading up to the highest state representatives run rampant in Kosovo, the poorest country of the region.¹²⁹

The estimates on the number of Jihadists in Kosovo according to Kosovo Government statements from June 2016 equaled over 300 fighters who left for the Middle East. Taking into consideration the number of citizens, Kosovo is proportionally the biggest contributor to the Islamic state in terms of soldiers.¹³⁰

The hoca Zequirja Qazim who was sentenced to 10 years in prison because of recruiting young Kosovars for the Jihad announced over YouTube: "The blood of the unbelievers is the best drink for us...". According to information

obtained by the French blog Mediapart, it is believed that there are five active Jihadist training camps, one of which is located just a few kilometers from the American base of Bondsteel.¹³¹

Kosovo also became a mecca for various charity organizations with Salafist content. As many as 14 such groups were prohibited in Kosovo during 2014. The Kosovo Government estimated that more than 300 Kosovars traveled to the Middle East for the purpose of joining the Jihad. As a result, according to the proportions (2 million citizens), Kosovo turned into the largest contributor of Islamist fighters. According to official information, over 50 Kosovo Jihadists were killed in the war zones in Iraq and Syria, while some 120 returned home. The town of Kacanik is considered to be the largest Jihadist town in the Balkans with 30.000 citizens, 24 of which joined Al-Qaeda.¹³²

Following the defeat of the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, the Jihadists returned to the Balkan countries. In line with joint estimates, out of 115 Bosnian Jihadists 46 came back home, while out of 138 Kosovo Jihadists 117 returned to the country. Western analysts are concerned with the fact that half of the returnees came back only to have zero contact with any operative institution. No one is stopping these indoctrinated fighters from continuing their dangerous mission

CONCLUSION

The Balkans are a dynamic region full of contrasts of virtually every kind: economic, social, religious, demographic and cultural.

At the same time, they represent the most sensitive part of the region where several cultures and civilizations meet and blend. The Balkans are emblematically an unstable area, a "gunpowder barrel" of sorts, they are "the soft underbelly of Europe".

Out of the three largest religions, the traditional Balkan Islam possesses the traits of a tolerant, open Islam soundly shielded from Wahhabist and Salafist influence.

The interethnic wars of the '90s and the presence of extreme paramilitary formations from the Middle East paved the way for radical Islam and the implementation of Salafism or neo-Salafism, considering its foreign roots and the new Balkan conditions.

The process of radicalization was facilitated by social poverty and a high rate of unemployment of the young population of the Western Balkans.

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